

SOME CORNER OF A FOREIGN FIELD FOREVER OTTOMAN

CONRAD THAKE WAS CAPTIVATED BY THE EXOTIC PALACE HE DROVE PAST AS A BOY IN MALTA. WHEN HE BECAME AN ARCHITECT, FASCINATION TURNED TO ADMIRATION – AND RECENTLY TO ALARM. HE HAS NOW HELPED TO HALT A CLODHOOPING SCHEME THAT THREATENED THE MAGIC OF ONE OF EUROPE’S ORIENTAL LANDMARKS. HERE HE GIVES THE BACKGROUND TO HIS BOOK ON THE SUBJECT

Ever since I was a small child, the local Ottoman Muslim cemetery has been a source of boundless fascination to me: an architectural enigma, a romantic Oriental fantasy that would embed itself in my consciousness and fire my imagination. Whenever I was driven past it in the back of my father’s Fiat 500, it appeared to me as some fantastical and exotic palace with fairytale towers, inhabited by dashing princes and foreign potentates, unlike anything I had ever seen around me.

I longed to explore it more closely, but as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry observes in *The Little Prince*, “sometimes there’s no harm in postponing your work until later”. And so, some 45 years on, as an architect and architectural historian, I felt it was high time to revisit the subject of my childhood fascination.

Abdülaziz (1861–76), the 32nd sultan of the Ottoman Empire, was the patron of the new Muslim cemetery in Malta, financing the entire project. The cemetery would replace one built in the 1670s to accommodate the mainly Turkish slave community. Until then, Muslims had been buried in a graveyard set aside for the Turkish dead during Süleyman the Magnificent’s abortive Great Siege of Malta of 1565.

Upon his accession as sultan in 1861, Abdülaziz cultivated good relations with both the Second French Empire and the British. In 1867, he became the first Ottoman sultan to visit Western

‘MARTYRS’ CEMETERY, MALTA’, 1874, BY GIROLAMO GIANNI (1837–95). THE HONEY-COLOURED BUILDINGS EPI TOMISED THE OTTOMAN REVIVALISM PROMOTED BY SULTAN ABDÜLAZİZ. THE GOTHIC REVIVAL CHURCH BEHIND, ‘OUR LADY OF SORROWS’ IN THE ADDOLORATA CEMETERY, IS BY THE SAME ARCHITECT, EMMANUELE LUIGI GALIZIA

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Europe. His trip included a visit to Paris for the *Exposition universelle* and to England, where he was inducted as a Knight of the Garter by Queen Victoria.

It was on this tour, in June 1867, that Abdülaziz appears to have visited Malta, to commemorate the Ottomans who had died in the Great Siege. The local British colonial authorities had been given notice of a short visit while he was in transit from Messina to Naples and thence to Toulon.

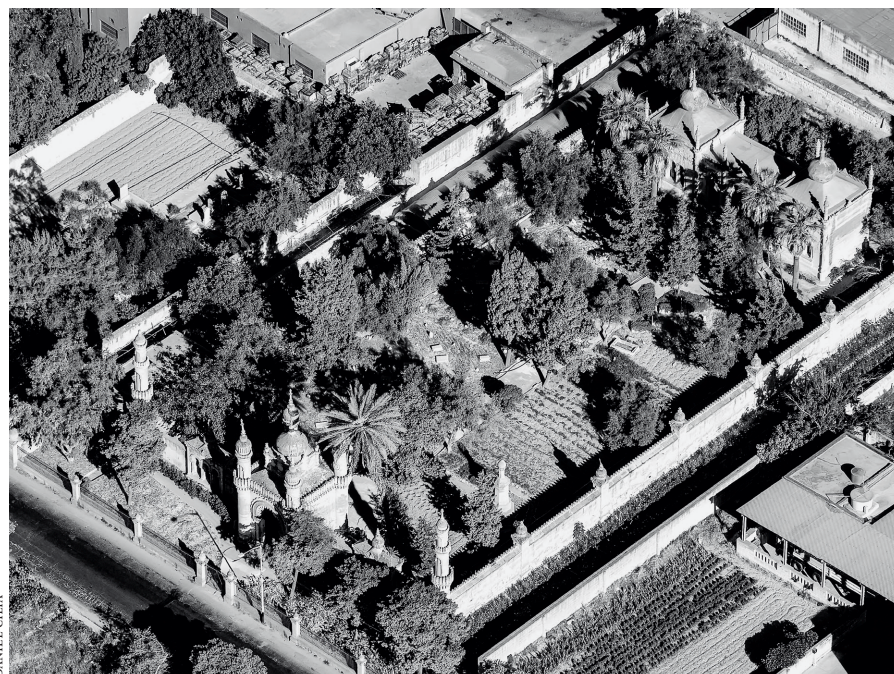
Building on the Tanzimat Reforms initiated by his brother and predecessor, Abdülmecid, the new sultan actively pursued the restructuring of Ottoman institutions as he navigated the difficult, at times treacherous, transition from an expansionist imperial state to a modern sovereign nation cultivating good relations with Europe. However, he revised the reforms from a more conservative perspective, and in turn promoted a revival of traditional Ottoman art and architecture.

The Paris exhibition saw the international launch of a distinctive Ottoman Islamic revivalism that found fertile ground in the 19th-century architectural scene. This neo-Ottoman language in symbiotic relation with European tradition is clearly articulated in a book published by the Sublime Porte on the occasion of the 1873 World's Fair in Vienna, *Usûl-i Mi'mârî-i Osmanî* (Fundamentals of Ottoman Architecture). Defining the rules of



CONRAD THAKE COLLECTION

ABOVE SULTAN ABDÜLAZİZ IN LONDON IN 1867, THE YEAR OF HIS EUROPEAN TOUR
BELOW AERIAL VIEW OF THE OTTOMAN CEMETERY AT MARSA, A WALLED PARADISE GARDEN NOW OVERGROWN WITH TREES. THE ENTRANCE PAVILION IS ON THE LEFT. AT THE OTHER END IS THE PRAYER LODGE



DANIEL CILIA

the geometry and science of Ottoman architecture "in accordance with the standards of the Beaux-Arts model", the book would promote a new style on a par with European revivalist styles and act as a model for contemporary architects.

This neo-Ottoman style – an eclectic array of Ottoman, Orientalist and Gothic elements – was avidly promoted by Abdülaziz both on a theoretical level, as in the treatise *Usûl*, and on a practical level in architectural projects in Istanbul such as his Çırağan Palace (1864–71) on the Bosphorus and his mother's mosque, the Pertveniyal Valide Sultan Camii in Aksaray (1869–71).

The contractual agreement for a new Muslim cemetery at Marsa was signed on June 11, 1873. The plan by the prolific Maltese architect Emanuele Luigi Galizia (1830–1907) provides details of the location, boundaries and dimensions of the proposed site, referred to as "Ta' Sammat". It specified a double-square plan 113 feet by 226 feet, with the cemetery set back from the street and separated from surrounding fields by a *strada* and a boundary wall.

The choice of Galizia must have been a natural one. Presumably he was highly recommended to the Sultan by the British colonial administrators, who had made him Malta's chief architect in 1860. He had already designed two major funerary complexes, at Ta' Braxia and Addolorata, the church at the latter being in the Gothic Revival style to appease British sentiments. Furthermore, his brother Joseph was consul for Malta in Istanbul, and his official position and contacts would have been useful in securing the project. The presence in Istanbul of the famous Maltese artist Count Amadeo Preziosi, meanwhile, could have led to a further endorsement of Galizia's abilities, had one been needed.

The construction of the new Muslim cemetery proved daunting to Galizia. There was no local historical precedent of Muslim architecture to follow. In his mind's eye, the design would embody a romantic fantasy of Orientalist imagery. His plan is based on a symmetrical design where the two main structures are placed centrally at the front and rear of the enclosed garden. Dominating the theatrical front elevation is a tall, square pavilion whose crowning bulbous dome looms between four decorative pinnacles.

Photographs taken when the cemetery was completed reveal how impressive the overall appearance was. Access is gained via the pavilion's horseshoe-arched portal, which is embellished with stone carvings. Above the doorway is the *tuğra*, or calligraphic cipher, of Sultan Abdülaziz and

COURTESY OF FRANCIS GALEA NAUDI



PHOTO RICHARD ELLIS / RIBATIX ARCHIVES



ABOVE THE CEMETERY'S MALTESE ARCHITECT, EMMANUELE LUIGI GALIZIA (1830-1907), LATER SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC WORKS, IN CEREMONIAL UNIFORM. HE TRANSLATED A NEO-OTTOMAN VISION INTO STONE
LEFT PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN WHEN IT WAS COMPLETED REVEAL HOW IMPRESSIVE THE GRAVEYARD WAS, WITH ITS SKYLINE OF 'MINARETS', DOMES AND CRESCENTS
TOP TAJ MAHAL MEETS BRIGHTON PAVILION: THE DELICATE PRAYER LODGE, c1880



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS CONRAD THAKE

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the date the cemetery was completed, 1290AH (1874). At the corners of this pavilion, attached columns project beyond the ornate parapet balcony in the form of minaret-like towers with domes and finials. Unlike the minarets on mosques, however, these are solid and purely decorative. Even more imposing minaret-like towers stand sentinel at the corners of the cemetery enclosure.

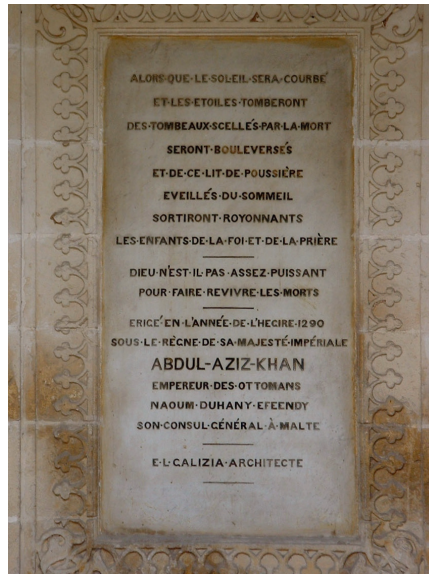
Piercing the walls either side of the pavilion are enticing triple-windowed loggias with intricate arabesque stone reliefs; and *jali* screens that give a glimpse of the greenery within. Each loggia has its own bulbous dome. Galizia, an avid admirer of the Alhambra Palace in Granada, was inspired to pursue the imagery of a walled Islamic paradise garden, traditionally a place of rest and meditation. When he built his own summer residence on the northeast coast of Malta, he would call it Alhambra.

The garden is divided by a path which leads to the prayer lodge at the far end, where two identical square rooms are connected by a triple-arched arcade. The central arch, a hybrid of horseshoe and ogee, is flanked by narrower horseshoe arches – an attractive expression of Galizia’s eclecticism. Each room has slender, attached columns at the corners that rise above the roofline as pinnacles terminating in lotus buds, and a large onion dome capping the pitched roof. Elaborate geometric carvings inspired by nature run along the top of the lodge’s walls.

Each of the rooms has a specific function. The eastern one was the preparatory room for the burial according to the Muslim rite. The western one was where prayers were recited before the burial. On the back wall of the arcade a marble plaque bears inscriptions in Turkish and French. The top one, in Arabic script, states: *Bu mezârlıq hicretîñ 1290 yılında ‘Osmânilarîñ pâdişâhî ‘Abdül’Azîz Sultan Hân zaman-ı saltanatında inşa edilmiştir* (“This cemetery was built in the year 1290AH [1873/4], during the reign of the Ottoman Sultan Abdülaziz Khan”).

Galizia adopted an eclectic combination of elements and motifs that are in effect a hybrid of Indo-Mughal and Moorish architecture. If the peerless Taj Mahal was a source of inspiration, so too was John Nash’s Royal Pavilion at the seaside resort of Brighton (1815–23), which embodied the spirit of British Orientalism.

The main entrance pavilion at the front has features such as cusped round arches flanked by columns that recall architecture in the Maghreb, particularly Tunisia’s Great Mosque at Kairouan. The intricate geometric surface of incised stonework,



OPPOSITE, TOP ROW FROM LEFT THE GRAND ENTRANCE TO THE CEMETERY HAS SLENDER COLUMNS, A CUSPED ARCH AND THE SULTAN’S ‘TUĞRA’; ONE OF THE PRAYER LODGE’S DECORATIVE PINNACLES; A SCREENED TRIPLE WINDOW – ONE OF A PAIR FLANKING THE ENTRANCE – HAS ARABESQUE CARVINGS TOPPED BY A DOME **OPPOSITE, BOTTOM** THE CEMETERY WAS NOT GALIZIA’S LAST WORD ON ORIENTALISM. IN

THE 1880S HE BUILT HIMSELF THIS TRIAD OF SUMMER HOUSES IN SĠIEMA, ON THE NORTHEAST COAST OF MALTA, CALLING THEM PAX, ALCAZAR AND ALHAMBRA **ABOVE** A PLAQUE COMMEMORATING THE FOUNDATION OF THE CEMETERY IN THE REIGN OF SULTAN ABDÜLAZİZ, ‘EMPEROR OF THE OTTOMANS’. HIS CONSUL-GENERAL, ‘NAOUM DUHANY EFEENDY [sic]’, PLAYED A KEY ROLE

multifoil horseshoe arches, *muqarnas* and filigree-like arabesques owe much to Spain’s 13th-century Alhambra. These are overlaid with a few overtly classical Ottoman elements, mainly multi-galleried pencil minarets and domes crowned with crescents, to give the complex its variegated skyline.

Galizia created an overall impression of flamboyance with this skyline of minaret towers and bulbous domes, together with the intricate *jali*-screened window openings and arabesque surface decoration. All this was evocatively captured in the Neapolitan artist Girolamo Gianni’s 1874 oil painting *Martyrs’ Cemetery, Malta*.

For the sultanate the cemetery was an

ideal opportunity to establish a tangible presence of neo-Ottoman culture on an island that historically associated the Ottomans with the invaders they had repelled in the Great Siege of 1565; on a symbolic level this grand architectural statement can be interpreted as a catharsis of this historical episode. At the same time, the sultanate sought to project an image of a new coming of age, an energised Ottoman state that would be viewed on a cultural par with the Western European powers, in this case the British Empire.

On a personal level, Galizia was honoured by the Sultan with the Order of Medjidie. Sultan Abdülaziz was less fortunate – the crop failure of 1873, compounded by his lavish expenditure, gave rise to great public discontent. On May 30, 1876, a coup mounted by his ministers resulted in Abdülaziz being deposed and confined to the Feriye Palace, close to his new Çırağan Palace, where he committed suicide a few days later.

The skyline of minarets, domes and crescents that had so bewitched me in my childhood, the enchanting alchemy of arches and arabesques, cusps and carvings, the peacefulness of the enclosed paradise garden and the dignity it bestows on the departed – all that was put in jeopardy last year when developers proposed building a controversial industrial garage complex right next to the burial ground.

Abdülaziz’s cemetery still has a resonance, however, for the people of Malta, and not only for the religious or aesthetically minded. Thus it was that “a public backlash”, and opposition from Maltese and Turkish campaigners concerned that it would “dwarf the Ottoman-Muslim cemetery built in 1873–74”, brought about a happy ending. In November 2019, the *Times of Malta* ran a story under the triumphant headline “‘BARBARIC’ PROPOSAL NEXT TO MALTA’S ‘TAJ MAHAL’ WITHDRAWN”. ♦

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● Also see ‘Envisioning the Orient: The New Muslim Cemetery in Malta’, by Conrad Thake, in the academic journal *‘Muqarnas’*, Vol 33, 2016, brill.com/view/title/33527

